

D. T. Suzuki and Mysticism

SAKAMOTO HIROSHI

I

D. T. Suzuki is the first Japanese thinker who expressed deep sympathy with mysticism from the Zen point of view. His contact with mystical literature may be traced back to the period of his first stay in the United States during which he worked as an assistant to Paul Carus, the editor of the *Open Court* and the *Monist*, in La Salle, Illinois. As the publications of Open Court Publishing Company clearly show, Carus was eager to acquaint his readers with the treasures of wisdom of the spiritual traditions of the East as well as the West. Suzuki thus had much opportunity for inspecting various texts of mystical literature, and he made willing use of it even while busying himself with his editorial tasks and English translation of Chinese texts.

From that time onward, mysticism seems to have become a subject of lifelong interest, alongside his primary involvement with Buddhism, especially Zen. What was it about mysticism that was so attractive to him? I think he found something in mysticism which was congenial to the Buddhist experience and life. This, I believe, he envisaged as the essential of mysticism.

A reader of Suzuki's works from time to time comes across topics related to mysticism and individual mystics in the course of expositions and discussions of Buddhist themes. But mostly they are fragmentary. In fact, if my memory is correct, only twice has he written at length on the subject of mysticism. The first was *Zen no tachiba kara*, the second part of which

consists of three essays on mysticism¹: "Zen and Mysticism," "Tauler's Zen," and "Kabir's Zen." The second was *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*,² which appeared 41 years later in 1957. What Suzuki envisaged as the essence of mysticism may be grasped mainly from the above two works.

"Zen and Mysticism" presents a rapid survey of the historical forms of mysticism from a Zen point of view. Important in this essay, however, are the five common characteristics of mysticism that the author sets forth before entering upon the problem of classification. They may be stated concisely as follows:

1. Genuine mysticism rests on inner experience of a specific kind that is intuitive and independent of any discriminative, discursive knowledge, be it called mystical experience, *unio mystica*, *communio mystica*, or whatever. It is the *sine qua non* of mysticism.
2. From experience of this kind flows out a new life. It may be called "inner life" (内的生涯 *naiteki shōgai*, or 境涯 *kyōgai*). Students of mysticism sometimes call it "mystical life." Mysticism is nothing other than the living and expressing into thought of this inner life. Mystics see everywhere the oneness of things beyond every limitation of time and space. They enjoy freedom from formalities, conventionalities, and worldly cares of every kind.
3. As for the way of expression, mystics tend to employ paradoxical language. It is no wonder, considering that their experience and life go beyond the ken of logical, analytical thinking.
4. Another way of expression characteristic of mysticism is by negation. It especially marks intellectual mysticism. Negativism of this kind is distinguished from mere agnosticism or nihilism by its being solidly backed by something unconditionally affirmative, that is, intuitive inner experience.

¹ *Zen no tachiba kara* (禅の立場から, From the Standpoint of Zen, Tokyo: Kōyō-kan, 1916): reprinted in Suzuki Daisetz Zenshū, vol. xiv, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1969), pp. 343-540.

² *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957). Hereafter referred to as *Mysticism*.

5. One more way of expression we frequently come across in mystical literature is symbolism. The mystic is led to this because of the impossibility of directly expressing inner experience and life. Mysticism thus has a poetic turn. For genuine mystics, however, symbolism is not merely figurative; it is realism of a kind for them.

Of the above five, we can say the former two bear on the fundamentals of mysticism and the latter three on its distinctive way of expression. It is worth noting that Suzuki stated the essentials of mysticism in terms of experience and life, in other words, in terms of human achievement, and kept them free from any mystification.

After the preliminary characterization of mysticism as stated above, he attempts a classification of its historical forms:

1. *Mysticism of faith.* Under this heading come Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Shin Buddhist mysticism. In this type of mysticism the inner experience takes the form of mystical union or communion.
2. *Contemplative mysticism.* Hindu yoga, Buddhist dhyana, Christian prayer and the like fall under this heading. Movements such as Christian Science and New Thought may also be included. Distinctive here is the emphasis on mental discipline, through which alone, it is held, the highest state of mind is attained.
3. *Intellectual mysticism.* This resembles philosophy in its abundance of intellectual elements, but is distinguished from philosophy in that it resorts to philosophical thinking in order to give voice to the inner experience and inner life. To this type of mysticism belong Vedanta philosophy, Neo-Platonism, German mysticism, Lao-tzean and Chuang-tzean philosophy, and Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.
4. *Superstitious mysticism.* (This he lists without comment.)

How about Zen? To what type does it belong? Suzuki admits that it may be possible to include Zen in intellectual mysticism but not in contemplative mysticism. In the last analysis, however, he asserts that Zen is so unique that it cannot be included in any of the above categories. He prefers to regard Zen as an independent and distinct type of mysticism. What makes Zen so unique? First, Zen, in incorporating an elaborately organized system of kōan exercise, is highly methodical. Second, in the

quest for *satori*, Zen strives to be thorough-going and exhaustive.

The other two essays, "Tauler's Zen" and "Kabir's Zen" serve as supplement to "Zen and Mysticism." Tauler (c. 1300-1361), one of Meister Eckhart's most prominent disciples, is a representative figure of German mysticism. Kabir (1440-1518) is a unique Indian mystic who brought together strains of Hinduism and Mohammedanism. Suzuki gives succinct accounts of the inner experiences of these two figures, their lives and thought, together with quotations from their sayings which exhibit a conspicuous affinity with those of the Zen masters. This presumably is the reason for the titles "Tauler's Zen" and "Kabir's Zen," instead of "Tauler's Mysticism" and "Kabir's Mysticism."

Let us turn now to Suzuki's later work, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*. In the preface he writes:

Eckhart's thoughts come most closely to those of Zen and Shin. Zen and Shin superficially differ: one is known as *Jiriki*, the "self-power" school, while the other is *Tariki*, the "other-power" school. But there is something common to both which will be felt by the reader. Eckhart, Zen, and Shin thus can be grouped together as belonging to the great school of mysticism. The underlying chain of relationship among the three may not be always obvious in the following pages. The author's hope, however, is that they are provocative enough to induce Western scholars to take up the subject for their study.³

It is evident from this that his aim in this book is a limited one: to make clear what is supposedly common to Meister Eckhart as a representative of Christian mysticism, some Zen masters, and a few *myōkonin*, especially Asahara Saichi, who represents Shin Buddhism.

This manner of selection, however, may impress the reader as being ingenuous. Above all the contrast between Eckhart and Saichi may at first appear strange, one being the summit of medieval German mysticism and the other an obscure maker of wooden clogs (*geta*). What meaning is there in such a comparison?

³ *Mysticism*, p. xxx.

Generally speaking, it is problematic to regard Eckhart as being representative of Christian mysticism. Suzuki himself writes: "As far as I can judge, Eckhart seems to be an extraordinary 'Christian.'"⁴ "We feel that it was natural that orthodox Christians of his day accused Eckhart as a 'heretic' and that he defended himself."⁵ Nevertheless, the fact remains that, while belonging to the Christian monastic tradition, Eckhart could give such original, elemental expression to the essentials of mysticism—inner experience and inner life—expressions that can be regarded as belonging with those of outstanding Mahayanist thinkers. In this Eckhart is unsurpassed by any other Christian mystic or thinker. This is no doubt the reason Suzuki chose Eckhart as representative of Christian mysticism.

What then about his giving prominence to Asahara Saichi as representing Shin Buddhism? As deficient in education and obscure in his lifetime as he was, Saichi had a rare genius for voicing his inner experience and life in a wonderfully expressive way. It is true that the phrasing of his verses was largely influenced by the Shin Buddhist sermons he used to listen to at the local temple; nevertheless, his roughly scribbled diaries exhibit a veritable cosmos of inner experience and life, full of the keen insight, bold speculation, and warm lyricism that bears the unmistakable mark of Saichi the man. They are thus worthy of close study as both religious and philosophical literature.

Even so, is it reasonable to compare Eckhart with Saichi as representative of Shin Buddhism, instead of some other Shin master? To this question Suzuki would reply that, insofar as the expression of inner experience and life is concerned, the comparison of the two is meaningful enough. He might add that he wanted to introduce Saichi to the West in this way.

It should now be clear that (a) inner experience and life (*kyōgai*) is what Suzuki regards as common to Christian mysticism, Zen, and Shin Buddhism, and that (b) Eckhart, Zen masters, and Saichi are called forth as giving voice to this common experience.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

II

In the following pages I would like to present a few of the characteristic points Suzuki makes in *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*. In the second chapter he gives his own interpretation of Eckhart's mystical experience from the Zen point of view. He takes a passage from one of Eckhart's tractates and comments on it:

The union of the soul with God is far more inward than that of the soul and body. . . . Now, I might ask, how stands it with the soul that is lost in God? Does the soul find herself or not? To this I will answer as it appears to me, that the soul finds herself in the point where every rational being understands itself with itself. Although it sinks in the eternity of the divine essence, yet it can never reach the ground. Therefore God has left a little point wherein the soul turns back upon itself and finds itself and knows itself to be a creature.⁶

This passage might leave one with the impression that Eckhart means that the soul cannot reach the bottom of Godhead and that mystical experience finally results in the soul's self-recognition as creature, as finite being. Suzuki writes that:

"A little point" left by God corresponds to what Zen Buddhists would call *satori*. When we strike this point we have a *satori*. To have *satori* means to be standing at Eckhart's "point" where we can look in two directions: God-way and creature-way. Expressed in another form, the finite is infinite and the infinite is finite. This "little point" is full of significance and I am sure Eckhart had a *satori*.⁷

Further he writes:

In the sense, this "little point" may be considered as corre-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76. Requoted from Inge's *Mysticism in Religion*, p. 39. For its original source, see F. Pfeiffer, ed., *Deutsche Mystiker des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Band 2: *Meister Eckhart*, p. 386.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

sponding to the Buddhist idea of *ichi-nen* (*ekacittakṣaṇa* or *ekakṣaṇa* in Sanskrit and *i-nien* in Chinese). Eckhart's "little point," if I understand it correctly, marks the turning point in the suchness of the Godhead. As long as the Godhead remains in its suchness, that is, in its naked essence, it is Emptiness itself; no sound comes from it, no odor issues from it, it is "above grace, above intelligence, above all desire," it is altogether unapproachable, unattainable, as Buddhist philosophers say. But because of this "little point" left by it, it comes in contact with creatures by making "the soul turn back to itself and find itself and know itself to be a creature." The time when the soul becomes conscious of its creatureliness is the time also when God becomes aware of his contact with creatures. Or we can say that this is creation.⁸

Suzuki attaches the significance of *satori* or *ichi-nen* to Eckhart's "turning back at the little point," whereas western scholars as a rule regard it as an exit from the state of mystic union into the consciousness of creatureliness and rather put emphasis on the soul's return to its creatureliness. *Satori*, for Suzuki, is awakening to the suchness of things and, if preceded by *śamādhi* or any other ecstatic state of mind, it takes place as the breaking-through and awakening out of such a state. It must not be confused with *śamādhi*. In this point he definitely differs from those who regard some ecstatic state as the union with God or mystical experience.

However, is Suzuki correct in this interpretation? Roughly speaking, there seems to be in Eckhart two ways of grasping this matter of the soul's return from the ecstatic state. One is to describe it merely as the soul's return from the state of beatitude to that of creaturely being as before; the other is to grasp it as a return in a deeper sense in which the soul returns to itself, not as the creaturely being as before, but as the new being transformed in the depth of Godhead. On the whole the latter seems to preponderate over the former in emphasis as well as in frequency in Eckhart himself.⁹ Suzuki, in the interpretation above, gives unique ex-

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ In connection with this, Eckhart confers various capacities to the power of reason (*intellectus*; *vernunftlichkeit*) as being transformed and divinely exalted.

pression to the latter view in terms of Buddhism or Zen. Dr. Nishitani Keiji seems to state much the same thing in somewhat Eckhartian phraseology in the following comment:

The said turning back of the soul to itself may be interpreted not as the resignation of being unable to reach the ground of God but as the elevation of the soul from the mere merging into nothingness to the standpoint in which nothingness and being are identical. In other words, that means the turning back of the soul to the standpoint as creature in which the unreachable bottom of God (Godhead) turns now to be the ground of the soul itself; in short, it is the turning back of the soul to its actual existence that now carries Godhead's nothingness within itself.¹⁰

Let me turn to the next point. Inner life, the life that flows out of *satori* or inner experience, is what Suzuki values most in mysticism as well as in Buddhism. His central idea in writing this book is, as mentioned above, to try to clarify how Eckhart, Zen masters and Shin *myōkōnin*, especially Saichō, converge in point of inner life.

In Chapter IV he defines the inner life as "living in the light of eternity." In connection with Eckhart's comments on the "now-moment," he says:

I have been reading all day, confined to my room, and feel tired. I raise the screen and face the broad daylight. I move the chair on the veranda and look at the blue mountains. I draw a long breath, fill my lungs with fresh air and feel entirely refreshed. I make tea and drink a cup or two of it. Who would say that I am not living in the light of eternity? We must, however, remember that all these are events of one's inner life as it comes in touch with eternity or as it is awakened to the meaning of "now-moment" which is eternity, and further that things or events making up one's outer life are no problems here.¹¹

¹⁰ Nishitani Keiji, *Kami to zettaiimu* (神と絶対無 God and Absolute Nothingness, Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1948; reprint ed., 1971), pp. 138-9.

¹¹ *Mysticism*, p. 111.

The "living in the light of eternity" as expressive of that inner life is substituted by the phrase "*kono-mama*" in Chapter VII. Suzuki writes:

The Japanese word *kono-mama* is the most fitting expression for this state of spiritual contentment. *Kono-mama* is the is-ness of a thing. God is in his way of is-ness, the flowers blossom in their way of is-ness, the birds fly in their way of is-ness—they are all perfect in their is-ness.¹²

According to him expressions of the same *kono-mama* are found in the writing of the Christian mystics, especially Meister Eckhart. "A flea to the extent that it is in God, ranks above the highest angel in his own right. Thus, in God, all things are equal and are God himself."¹³ "If you can take what comes to you through him, then whatever it is, it becomes divine in itself; shame becomes honor, bitterness becomes sweet, and gross darkness, clear light. Everything takes its flavor from God and becomes divine; everything that happens betrays God when a man's mind works that way; things all have this one taste; and therefore God is the same to this man alike in life's bitterest moments and sweetest pleasures."¹⁴ In Eckhart, as a Christian mystic, *kono-mama* would naturally refer first of all to God, whereas Zen masters as a rule are concrete and oftentimes express it aesthetically. Suzuki takes a poetic stanza by Goso Hōyen (五祖法演, Wu-tsu Fa-yen, d. 1104):

In the foreground precious stones and agates,
In the rear agates and precious stones;
To the East Kwannon and Seishi,
To the West Monju and Fugen.¹⁵
In the middle there is a streamer:
As a breeze passes by
It flutters, "hu-lu," "hu-lu."¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁵ Kwannon, Seishi, Monju, and Fugen are the chief Mahayana Bodhisattvas: in Sanskrit, respectively, *Avalokiteśvara*, *Mahāsthāmaprāpta*, *Mañjari*, and *Saṃantabhadra*.

¹⁶ *Mysticism*, p. 144.

Needless to say, the point of this poem is the "hu-lu, hu-lu" of the streamer in the breeze. It is expressive in an interesting way of the *kono-mama*-ness of *kyōgai*, its absolute affirmativeness and responsiveness to whatever comes. This "hu-lu, hu-lu" reminds Suzuki of one of Saichi's outflowings:

Saichi's mind is like the gourd [on water],
Floating all the time,
Blown by the winds, it flows on floating
To Amida's Pure Land.¹⁷

One difference, Suzuki points out, between Shin and Zen is that the Zen masters would not say "to Amida's Pure Land." They would not mind if the gourd floated on to hell although they would not object to its floating on to the Pure Land either. Despite this difference, "hu-lu, hu-lu" itself, or *kono-mama* itself is one and identical as flowing immediately out of the deep experience of Emptiness, that is, experience beyond discriminative knowledge.

The latter half of the book is composed of a selection of verses from Saichi's jottings and Suzuki's free interpretive comments on them. These comments are very interesting and helpful for understanding Suzuki's unique view of the *kyōgai* of *myōkōnin*. Here, however, I will limit myself to quoting only one of these, dealing with the *Nembutsu*:

Now we see that the *Nembutsu*, or the *Myōgō*, or the "Namu-amida-butsu" is at the center of the Shin faith. When this is experienced, the devotee has the "steadfastness of faith," even before he is in actuality ushered into the Pure Land. For the Pure Land is no more an event after death, it is right in this *sahalokadhātu*, the world of particulars. According to Saichi, he goes to the Pure Land as if it were the next-door house and comes back at his pleasure to his own.

I

I am a happy man, indeed!
I visit the Pure Land as often as I like:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

I'm there and I'm back,
I'm there and I'm back,
I'm there and I'm back,
"Namu-amida-butsu! Namu-amida-butsu!"

When Saichi is in the Pure Land, "there" stands for this world; and when he is in this world, "there" is the Pure Land; he is back and forth here and there. The fact is that he sees no distinction between the two. Often he goes further than this:

2

How happy I am!
"Namu-amida-butsu!"
I am the Land of Bliss,
I am Oya-sama.
"Namu-amida-butsu! Namu-amida-butsu!"

3

Shining in glory is Buddha's Pure Land,
And this is my Pure Land!
"Namu-amida-butsu! Namu-amida-butsu!"

4

O Saichi, where is your Land of Bliss?
My Land of Bliss is right here.
Where is the line of division
Between this world and the Land of Bliss?
The eye is the line of division.

To Saichi "Oya-sama" or "Oya" not only means Amida himself but frequently personifies the "Namu-amida-butsu." To him, sometimes, these three are the same thing: Amida as Oya-sama, the *Myōgō* ("Namu-amida-butsu"), and Saichi. . . . When we go through these lines endlessly flowing out of Saichi's inner experience of the "Namu-amida-butsu" as the symbol of the

oneness of the *ki* and *hō*¹⁸ we feel something infinitely alluring in the life of this simple-minded *geta*-maker in the remote parts of the Far Eastern country. Eckhart is tremendous, Zen is almost unapproachable, but Saichi is so homely that one feels like visiting his workshop and watching those shavings drop off the block of wood.¹⁹

The quotation above is somewhat lengthy, but I think it serves to show something of Saichi's *kyōgai* and how Suzuki views it. According to Saichi, what divides this world from the Pure Land is the "eye," that is, faith experience beyond all discriminative knowledge. In the footnote on this "eye" Suzuki comments that it reminds us of Eckhart. This world and the Pure Land thus divided by the eye of experience interfuse and interpenetrate each other every moment afresh and thus exhibit the wonder of the Dharmadhātu.

III

Before closing, a few more words may be needed regarding Suzuki's view of the relationship between Zen and mysticism. To this point, it would appear that he regarded Zen as a form, be it with some qualification, of mysticism. But this is not the whole story. We must not overlook the fact that elsewhere he declines, or at least is reluctant, to take Zen as mysticism. For example, in a book review of Father Heinrich Dumoulin's *A History of Zen Buddhism* written late in his life, he says:

I cannot go further without remarking on the major contention of this book, which is that Zen is a form of mysticism. Unfortunately, some years ago, I too used the term in connection with Zen. I have long since regretted it, as I find it now highly misleading in elucidating Zen thought. Let it suffice to say here

¹⁸ *ki* and *hō*: *Hō* (法 the Dharma or Law) denotes in most cases in Shin Buddhism, Amida's Dharma or the operation of Amida's *mahākaruṇā* (great compassion); *ki* (機 readiness to respond), the subject or subjectivity that is necessary in order to respond to *hō*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-4.

that Zen has nothing "mystical" about it or in it. It is most plain, clear as the daylight, all out in the open with nothing hidden, dark, obscure, secret or mystifying in it.²⁰

Does this betray Suzuki's lack of fixed principle in viewing mysticism? If not, what does it mean? Let me suggest an explanation.

It is widely known that mysticism historically has something to do with "mystery" (*mysterion* in Greek). Suzuki hitherto took it to mean an open mystery. It had to be so for him. For precisely this reason he envisaged Zen as a form of mysticism. "It is mystical in the sense that the sun shines, that the flower blooms, that I hear at this moment somebody beating a drum in the street. If these are mystical facts, Zen is brimfull of them."²¹ In a word, the mystery in Zen is the grand mystery of non-mystery. It is another name for the *kyōgai* or spiritual realm of *kono-mama*. According to Suzuki, this grand mystery is confirmed in a number of great mystics, but especially in Meister Eckhart. Without this sort of mystery, mysticism would be trifling and insubstantial. It is no wonder Suzuki regarded Zen as a form of mysticism as long as he took his stand on the conviction as stated above. But the fact remains that the history of mysticism has been entangled with the conception of mystery as something closed, secret, or esoteric. That fact is reflected in the interpretations of mysticism by western scholars. When he grew keenly aware of this, the above being merely one case in point, I think he then felt it imperative to keep Zen apart from mysticism.

There is thus undeniably a fluctuation in Suzuki's view of the relationship between Zen and mysticism, even though he regards it basically in an affirmative light. The fluctuation may be said to reflect a wavering of view as to the nature of mysticism. Ideally or in principle he envisaged as an essential of mysticism the *kyōgai* of *kono-mama* in which everything as-it-is is a grand mystery of non-mystery. In actuality, however, he could not wholly disregard the prevailing predisposition that colors the history of mysticism, this in spite of the handful of great mystics who lived in the light of eternity and enjoyed the open wonder of non-mystery. And yet

²⁰ *Eastern Buddhist* 1, 1, p. 124.

²¹ *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider & Company, 1949), p. 45.

D. T. SUZUKI AND MYSTICISM

there seems little doubt that were it not for the great figures of mystical tradition such as Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, Brother Lawrence, and so on, Suzuki would have never given it his attention at all.